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# Political Communication and Broadcasting: Theory, Practice and Reform

**Colum McCaffery**

The origins of this research project lie in the writer's dissatisfaction with the growing library of work which frets aimlessly about the effects of broadcasting on political communication. Missing from the shelves, it is argued, is a clear statement of what is achievable by way of political communication. In other words, if television's contribution to political communication is to be criticized, a set of criteria - a specification - for adequate public debate is long overdue.

In order to make the project manageable and effective, it is confined to explicit political communication - the stuff of political debate and public controversy generally. That is to say, political communication is understood here to refer i) to messages openly aimed at eliciting support for a political point of view or for a party or candidate seeking elective office, and ii) to information necessary or useful to reaching decisions on lending such support. The question of implicit political communication contained in, say, drama is excluded.

The specification which is developed over two chapters amounts to a list of basic requirements which any democratic society might expect of its political communication system. The idea is that we will know what we mean when we speak of good political communication and what we want to achieve when we consider reforms. While the specification is developed through a study of four approaches to political communication - liberalism, pluralism, the Frankfurt School, and Marxist structuralism - there is no question of attempting to reduce diversity in political theory to just four approaches or to hammer irreconcilable viewpoints into a contrived consensus. The four approaches span the broad face of political and media theory even if they do not cover it. Moreover, the intention is not to develop an all-encompassing specification for political communication before which all will have to bend the knee. Rather the intention is to develop - by way of an in-depth consideration of a broad range of theory - a reasonable and credible ideal.

The specification which emerges is made up of particular requirements none of which are terribly radical. Taken as a set, however, they are comprehensive and demanding. They include requirements that political communication concern itself with arguments about alternative social goals instead of political news or even gossip, that the arguments be competent and readily understood, and that the interests they promote be made clear. There are requirements not only for freedom of expression and information but for positive dissemination of relevant information. There are also requirements for the presentation of diverse views and challenging alternatives. The outstanding feature of the specification is its emphasis on a discourse which is formal, contentious and reasoned. What is required is not just an absence of media manipulation but a framework in which the methods and conditions of debate can be improved.

There would be little point in prescribing all of this for an abstract, typical democracy. Instead Ireland is taken as a case in point in order to examine real possibilities and difficulties. A brief political history of Irish broadcasting is presented, followed by an evaluation of existing Irish controls on broadcast politics - the broadcasting acts, institutions and legal devices, and guidelines which control broadcast politics. This history and evaluation together provide the background necessary for an informed attempt to reform politics, i.e. to deliver on the promise of the specification.

Attention then turns to a discussion of alternative approaches to reform and finally to detailed recommendations. The recommendations involve changes to the broadcasting

acts: firstly, to require that a reasonable proportion of news and current affairs be devoted to explicit political communication; secondly, to spell out what we require by way of political communication and broadcast coverage of public controversy generally (this supersede existing impartiality requirements); thirdly, with reference to Section 31, to permit coverage of the controversy over political violence in Ireland while simultaneously restricting the appearance of terrorists. Finally, the recommendations also involve freeing the Broadcasting Complaints Commission from present limitations and allowing it to become a forum for discussing and sorting out the practical implications of obligations on broadcasting. The recommendations tread the narrow ground between unrealistic changes which ignore commercial reality or existing conventions, and the smug assumption that nothing can be done or needs to be done. They offer a workable blueprint for reform.